



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

Does the Doctrine of Election Make God Unloving?

Dylan D. Potter, Ph.D. Student
Systematic Theology, University of St. Andrews, U.K. ¹

If one interprets the question ‘Does the doctrine of election make God unloving?’ in a literal sense, the answer must always be an emphatic ‘No!’ However, this negation arises not because of a desire to reconcile the tension between divine love and divine freedom, but simply because God’s love is never defined or limited by something as mercurial as a doctrine. I say this because it is crucial that one differentiates between a doctrinal position and the character of God; to draw too close a distinction between the two runs the risk of devaluing God and deifying theology. On the surface, the question is all the more problematic because it appears to imply that there is *one* doctrine of election. Yet if one was to place a collection of Christian theologians from different traditions, eras and nations in a locked room until they reached a unanimous agreement upon *the* doctrine of election, the world would have to wait a very long time indeed before the group emerged again. After all, if such august figures as Basil, Augustine, Lombard, Aquinas, Calvin, Wesley, Barth and Pannenberg are not in agreement about many things, why would we assume that our mythical group of theologians would be any different? It would be equally dangerous to assume that the present readership is in agreement on this issue. Herein lies the problem: the individual in his

¹ See school at www.St-Andrews.ac.uk.

or her vain attempt to plumb the depths of God's mysterious counsels will never be satisfied with answers which conflict with their own. This is one reason why ecumenical councils have stalled in the last century.

Of course, there is no confusion about the doctrine of election upon the divine side of the equation, but numerous examples from the Scriptures testify to humankind's absolute inability to grasp the essence of God, whether this is illustrated by Adam and Eve's gullibility, Israel's idolatry, the advice of Job's friends, or the Apostle's inability to grasp Christ's teaching and actions. This is not to say that one can never know anything about God, it is just to caution that one must tread lightly when stepping out upon the thin ice of divine mysteries. We can affirm that much of what we know about God is revealed to us through that form of revelation which we now know as the Bible. Yet anybody who has been engaged on either side of a discussion about election will tell you, each party in the discussion is not without his or her own proof texts. In other words, because the Scriptures are not a dictionary of theological terms with neat definitions written after their parts of speech, everyone tends to find evidence which corroborates their position. The Arminian and Calvinist are both able to find the verses they were looking for, but neither one seems to like the other's interpretation of those passages.

Paul Zahl briefly illustrates the history and futility of this theological tennis match in his book, *The Protestant Face of Anglicanism*,

the anxious voice of the law insinuates itself chronologically and devilishly into the Christian movement once the grace of God is preached. In the case of the second and third generations of the English Reformers, the voice of law became loud due to the hardening, on the Reformed side, of ideas concerning grace into ideas concerning election. If God does it *all*—and I contribute nothing to my salvation—then *how* does he do it, and why? Justification by grace through faith, because it posits the *bound* condition of the human being before the advent of grace, posits the total *freedom* of God. Then the question in theology becomes, what 'governs' the freedom of God? Before we know it, we are in the dark and unfathomable waters of the purposes of God in the predestination question.²

² Paul Zahl, *The Protestant Face of Anglicanism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988), 23.

Zahl's point here is that, historically speaking, doctrines like election may be turned into laws which become so unbearably heavy that they obscure the primacy of grace and the freedom of God. If one is incessant about such matters, they will eventually find that all their questions lead to an infinite regress, and throw them back upon a completely unanswerable mystery. These 'dark and unfathomable waters' are not a bad place to visit from time to time as long as one accepts the fact that they reveal few secrets beyond the fact that salvation is not merited by personal contribution, but provided by grace.

Because the discussion of election actually has little to do with seeing who can quote the most Scripture and more to do with a particular emotional attachment to a theological position, it is quite certain that many people cannot be persuaded to change their perspective, no matter how much Greek and Hebrew one uses. Of course, it is fine to believe that our personally held convictions about Scripture are based purely upon logic or some epistemologically verifiable axioms, but in the end, there is a deep emotional attachment lurking beneath all our assumptions, which is why we defend them as if they were our firstborn. Yet one wonders if such discussions are worthwhile, because both parties frequently engage in uncharitable distortions of the other's position, or worse, of Scripture, and the tone during most debates about election is off-putting to many nonbelievers who have every right to expect Christians to answer one another 'with gentleness and respect' (1Pet 3:15).

Nevertheless, I shall stroll briefly down this thorny path to discuss the relationship between God's central attribute, (namely, His love) which appears to contradict the extent of that love, or at least, would redefine love in a sense it seems very difficult for many of us to comprehend. What we are likely talking about here, just to be clear, is the particular doctrine of election that asserts that God has chosen some individuals for salvation while passing over others. As I have already noted, what is needed in discussions like these is not the divisive and emotional rhetoric which generally serves to divide Christian brothers and sisters, but a fair acknowledgement that no position on election *makes* God any more or less loving. Rather than reiterating the biblical precedents for such a discussion, I will merely point the reader to Dr. Ukwuegbu's excellent overview of the

theology of election in the Scriptures,³ as well as Barry Hofstetter's rejection of corporate election.⁴ Both of these individuals represent the logic which drives many Christians to one belief about election or another. Instead, I would like to use this opportunity to discuss the matter in a broad and pastoral light.

What I am more concerned with is the relationship between the love of God and how one communicates especially difficult doctrines which seem quite foreign to the modern person. I believe what lies at the core of this question concerning God's love and his election is whether there is any way to explain this paradox to those who are not engaged with theology and philosophy on a daily basis. So while it is perfectly acceptable to have such a discussion among Christian clergy and scholars, what the person in the *pew* really wants to know is what sort of God, God is. And it is at this point that I believe both parties to the election debate need to stress that the God whom we worship is not manageable, that He seems to take delight in the paradoxical, that He has done things which are perhaps more difficult to accept than that he has graciously chosen to elect people to eternal life (e.g. making a law that rape victims must marry their attacker (Dt 22:28-29), the idea of *herem* in Joshua, etc), and yet somehow, *God defines Himself* as loving. All that God does has its origin within an inscrutable will which humans cannot fully comprehend. Indeed, God's ways are not our ways. Given that a finite human being has no right to question an infinite Being's own testimony or self-definition, (for this has always been at the core of humanity's rejection of the Son), we rely upon what He has revealed to us and interpret it in view of the fact that He describes Himself as loving. What the person in the *pew* must know is that it is possible to maintain everything which has been revealed about God even though it may seem contradictory or against reason, because it is never a problem for God himself. In other words, God is not embarrassed by the sending of a flood, the destruction of multitudes of Egyptians who had no part in Pharaoh's

³ Bernard Onyebuchi Ukwuegbu. "Election in Ephesians 1: Individual or Corporate?" *Testamentum Imperium* 2 (2009). Cited 19 January 2010. Online: http://www.preciousheart.net/ti/2009/25-044_Ukwuegbu_Election_in_Ephesians.pdf.

⁴ Barry Hofstetter. "A Defense of Individual Election unto Salvation & Critique of Absolute Corporate Election" *Testamentum Imperium* 1(2005-07). Cited 23 February 2010. Online: <http://www.preciousheart.net/ti/2007/07-3%20Hofstetter,%20N.%20E.%20Barry%20-%20Individual%20Election%20vs%20Corporate%20Election.pdf>.

stubbornness, the brutal slaughter of the Amalekites—including pregnant women and defenceless children, the sorrows and afflictions of Job, the mistreatment and murder of his Son, or the martyrdom of the Apostles and the persecution that has stuck like a thorn in the side of the Church since its inception. Given these things, why should election be a problem?

To come to this issue with certainties seems foolish, in my opinion. As if by reading one's Bible a certain way, we can unlock the inscrutable mind of God. Stringing together verses as proofs is as common for the Arminian as it is for the Calvinist, and I am afraid that both walk away from their debates clutching their own interpretations even tighter than before. There is often little grace in these discussions, and more fire than warmth. Watching from the sidelines, one could be forgiven for thinking that both parties had actually been to heaven with St. Paul, but unlike him, had returned to reveal their profound secrets to anyone who is willing to listen. I speak from years of experience, from debates which I thought I had won, but which yielded more bitter fruit than sweet. To be fair, everyone must have some doctrine of election, and it is safe to say that those who claim they do not believe in it, are merely rejecting one version because they feel that it undermines something sacred about God.

There is a sense of desperation about those who feel the need to foist their doctrine of election upon others. We should be very careful this side of heaven about determining for others precisely what they should hold to be true about election. I am not unaware of the self-incriminating fact that by writing that last sentence, I myself have just engaged in such a prescription. Nonetheless, I do not know how else to make the point without contradicting myself in the process, and perhaps this is what is at the heart of the question 'Does the doctrine of election make God unloving?' because it appears that there is a contradiction which needs to be resolved. What Christianity says, however, is that one must face all mysteries concerning God's nature and activity by looking for the Christological, if not a cruciform thread which binds them together. So while individuals will continue to stoke the embers of whether election refers to a corporate or individual inclusion into the family of God, what we can all affirm is that the Father elected Christ from the foundation of the world as a

means of reconciling Himself to a humanity who either chooses to doubt his love or defines it in such a way that it supports their own shibboleths. In the end, however, it is God who has most fully committed himself to the plan of salvation in ways which are beyond imagination. He has only revealed the fringes of election to the world, and it is only as persons who have experienced this divine gift that we can affirm our own election (Rom 8:28-39). However, there is a straightforward way to affirm that the doctrine of election does not make God unloving. Knowing ourselves as we truly are, whom but a loving, merciful God would choose to bring meritless and often unnecessarily argumentative people like us into His family for all eternity?



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti